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Jacksonville Navy pilots to get cutting edge software

It helps reach a goal of making training more portable and cheaper.

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By **Timothy J. Gibbons**

Last year, Jacksonville Naval Air Station became home to the first East Coast squadron to use the Sikorsky MH-60R, the Navy's newest helicopter.

Next year, the pilots flying those machines will start using a new type of simulation software to hone their operation skills, including using the helicopter's cutting-edge radar system.

The new software is the latest result of a project that began in 1996. The goal: To make training equipment more portable and cheaper.

California-based Stottler Henke is being paid $9 million to develop the software, which can run on standard computers including laptops.

"You can take this to sea with you," said Robert Richards, the company's project manager. "The whole point is the guy can go into the ready room on a ship or his own room and practice."

Typically, pilots split their training time between actual helicopters and large, costly simulators - cheaper than really flying, but coming with their own costs and not always available.

"PC-based training is a cost-efficient way to supplement the training pilots receive in simulators and the aircraft," Navy spokeswoman Lt. Callie Ferrari said. "While not a replacement for high-end motion-based simulators or training flights, it does allow pilots to quickly hone their skills for certain cockpit tasks and mission planning techniques."

Among the skills the pilots will hone is using the forward-looking infrared radar system on the helicopter: The company is in the midst of creating a hand control unit that can be plugged into the computer.

The software also comes with realistic sonar training, an important facet considering the helicopter's roots in anti-submarine warfare.

"They need a lot of acoustic training, and that wasn't something that could be done outside a simulator," Richards said.

This is the second software package the Navy has hired Stottler Henke to create. The earlier version didn't provide training in using the radar or acoustic equipment.

The software is now being tested at North Island Naval Air Station. It's expected to be rolled out at Mayport Naval Station and Jacksonville Naval Air Station in early 2011.

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